

THE STORY OF AN HOUR AS A DREAM OF UNIVERSAL MAGNITUDE

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how approaching most of Kate Chopin's works from a single-sided feminist perspective may be both misleading and confusing to the artistic quality and canon of this literary figure who, in fact, explores themes of universal magnitude that go beyond gender, race, religion or class to show that "Freedom" is not only associated with oppressed women in 19th century America but also with anyone who can be categorized as oppressed or suppressed figure. The paper's main hypothesis is that 'Feminism's proponents' and most critics fell victim to the recurrence of the marginal woman as a protagonist in Chopin's most stories and hence judged her accordingly. The research paper investigates this hypothesis within the framework of Chopin's short story *The Story of an Hour* and with particular reference to her background as a writer. The results of this research may open the door for newer investigations into Kate Chopin's fiction. Researchers and scholars who would like to prove that "Feminism" is not the primary concern of this writer, may find this study a 'git-go'.*

KEYWORDS: American Dream, Feminism, Symbolism, Humanity, Individualism & Freedom

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1. INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

A feverish feminist wave of adherent critical views in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in labeling the re-discovered **Kate Chopin** (February 8, 1850 – August 22, 1904) as a pioneer feminist literary figure. She was widely believed to be a feminist. A professor emeritus of English at the University of Michigan–Dearborn states that,

"Chopin presents us with a picture of a complicated and complex development of Louise Mallard's spiritual awakening triggered by the false news of her husband's death in a train accident. Louise is a pioneering feminist searching for selfhood and freedom, not "an immature egoist and a victim of her own extreme self-assertion". (Berkove, 2000: 152).

With reference to her stories, a lot about marriage, love as well as women's situation and social practices may be understood.

Evidently in The story of an Hour, Chopin is believed to attempt to deconstruct the ideas of a wife and a mother, which are previously constructed and assigned by the patriarchal world (Johan, 2008: 39). Yet, it is the researcher's belief that the essence of Chopin's works is not to defend the repressed woman (*feminism*) in a patriarchal society; instead, the quality of her works lies far more beyond that. Chopin's, themes and signs which are encapsulated in her stories belong to everyone regardless of culture, race, sex or religion. These ideas and signs concern human conditions in general rather than feminism.

The misjudgment of Chopin's works might be justified by the strong movement of feminism in the 19th century in the United States that got a lot of attention and support. In addition, it is obvious that the American culture in the 19th century was not fully ready for such spirit, courageous writings, and talent as those offered by *Kate Chopin*. The standards and social norms of the 19th century society in America were still immature to welcome women writers, particularly those who would discuss subjects that were classified as '*taboos*' or '*challenging*' to the established order. Themes and topics like '*individual rights*', '*marriage institution*', '*patriarchy*' and the '*role of women*', were considered '*immoral*' and '*unhealthy*'. In this period of time, women were victims of unusual discrimination at all levels.

Furthermore, not only were women prevented from handling these topics in their writings or discussion groups but also as women writers they were expected and required to uphold the American social moral standards by teaching their children, being submissive, voiceless and obedience to their husbands and if they were to have a career such as writing they were expected to publish works that are related to '*a woman's sphere of knowledge*'. So the 19th century America was very conservatives about these "*issues*" of women's rights and very sensitive to questions of *individual freedom, racism and equality* with its broad meaning.

Women of that period were not expected to react in any way against the established order of the society, in which '*individual rights*', '*marriage institution*', '*patriarchy*' and the *role of woman* were totally shaped and dominated by men. This makes some female voices which were in line with such views acceptable. Mrs. Roe was one of those women, who expressed such opinions that work in harmony with the social norms of the period, stated in her book "A Woman Thought on the Education of Girls", that "*educated girls become strong-minded women – such girls are dogmatic and presumptuous, self-willed and arrogant, eccentric in dress and disagreeable in manner.*" (qtd. in David 19, in Rachel 13 'sic'). Such viewpoint reflects not only a total acceptance and confirmation of a masculine-dominated society but also the inequality which was constructed by both society and culture. Therefore, *Chopin's* works were labeled to be unsuitable for society norms and morale. This situation led to the disappearance of her writings till there were resurfaced in 1969.

Most of *Chopin's* major characters in her stories are married women challenging the social order. From a woman's point of view, she tries to capture women's struggles as well as the American social reality to her readers. On the other hand, the British writers of that period, who adhered to the depiction of the traditional social norms and unwritten laws in a realistic way including famous novelists such as *Charles Dickens* (1812 –1870), *Jane Austen* (1775 –1817), *Anthony Trollope* (1815 –1882), *William Thakery* (1811 –1863), and *George Eliot* (1819 –1880), shared with their readers the recognition and acceptance of the established social order and hence found no obstacles to employ realism. Contrary, the American novelists, were challenged by a moving nation and new frontiers that demand creativity and immediate changing of artistic tools. Writers like *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1804 –1864), *Herman Melville* (1819 –1891), and *Edgar Allan Poe* (1809 –1849), invented their own heroes and symbols in a different way that match a nation of moving standards of living. Therefore, their literary production was different in type and nature because "*in America, it is not enough to be a traditional and definable social unit, for the old and traditional gets left behind; the new innovative force is the center of attention.*" (pp. 36-37 Outline of American Literature).

Being born in such an environment, Chopin began to surface the issues of inequality, injustice, woman role, and marriage institution as she was tapping upon international dimensions in handling such topics. In her writings, she had reconstructed the ideas of freedom, individualism, and humanity.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this study are to:

- investigate the artistic quality of Kate Chopin's works
- explain how modern critics have been misguided by the representation of 'woman' in her short stories and novels, taking it for granted that Chopin is a dedicated 'feminist' writer.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is mainly descriptive analytic in nature that incorporates other methodologies of research in investigating whether the critics have done Kate Chopin justice by approaching her works from a single-sided viewpoint of feminism or not. A stylistic analytic approach enhanced by reader's-response method have been in effect throughout this study which also uses '**semiotics**' to discover the final message behind Chopin's works.

The study reveals a theoretical framework that handles previous studies of Kate Chopin's and elaborates on feminist criticism on her works as well as her biography and the literary figures that influenced her, particularly Maupassant and the transcendentalists.

One of her widely acknowledged stories as a feminist manifesto of women's repression in the nineteenth century, namely *The Story of an Hour* is approached critically and analytically within the context of the study, taken as a particular reference to justify the earlier hypothesis that critics have unfairly judged the essence of Chopin's works. The final part of the study is a conclusion in which the researcher establishes the main findings. There is a list of Chopin's other short stories attached to the study as an 'Appendix' directly after the list of 'References'.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Nancy Walker, one of America's most celebrated defenders of feminism, most of *Kate Chopin's* themes focus on and revolve around "*love between people of radically different backgrounds, the possibility of more than one relationship in a lifetime, and the power of a woman to live by her own principles.*"(pp 65-66). In this regard, it would be true that she was like a venturing boat sailing alone and recklessly against the current as most American writers of that period did not attempt to challenge the general trend of handling issues that celebrate the existing norms without a sense of conformity and unison. She has evidently treated revolutionary thematic concerns as she asserts an unusual voice which speaks and treats universal concerns. In other words, in her works she regularly reveals a concern with the authenticity of a woman's life and the importance – and the possibility – of options.

It was natural for Chopin to seek other European literary cardinals and mentors for influence and inspiration. The French *Guy De Maupassant's* (1850 –1893) influence, whose short stories appealed to Chopin's fancy due to their techniques and issues treated such as sexuality and self-assertion, is impossible to be unnoticed. Similarly to Chopin's themes and characters, his best stories are about the lives of women, and some of his strongest characters are those of fille de joies, working girls and wives. These themes and characters which were evidently treated by *Maupassant* and valued by Chopin were actually far beyond the reach for the American literary figures of the period. As stated before, those American writers preferred to practice both celebrations of norms and self-censorship. Equally the same, the majority of European writers of the period, were just able to portray women who challenge the established authority and order of their patriarchal society as destitute or stigma. An obvious example of this claim is Victor Hugo (1802 –1850) in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 –1864) in *The Scarlet Letter* (published in 1850).

Thus, Chopin's saw in Maupassant's works something vital and new that gripped her soul and opened her eyes to

the fact that she could live and act differently. No better evidence to testify for this than Chopin's own words in one of her unpublished essays eight years before she started writing her stories:

"I read his stories and marveled at them. Here was life, not fiction: for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinking way I had fancied were essential to art making. Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon his life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw..." (Jane Le Marquand: 1996)

Most of Chopin's fiction is highly realistic in nature particularly the way in which she draws her characters and describes them in a vivid yet straightforward manner. When these characters speak, they speak in accents that befit them. However, her thematic use of nature and scenery as well as the projection of what happens inside these characters, their thoughts and feelings, bear witness to the Romantic engagement with an American flavor of Transcendentalism. In this respect, Kate Chopin is a non-conformist "Romantic" writer. To clarify this point, it will be beneficial to elaborate on American Romanticism.

Unlike the British Romantic poets and novelists, the American writers of the 19th century looked at matters concerning human existence differently paying special attention to their own pose under the conditions of the new Republic faced with challenges such as Independence and the civil war. Writers such as *Edgar Allan Poe* (1809 –1849) and *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1804 – 1864) resorted to supernatural elements and heroes who could face war/death as mentioned before. Others such as the poet *Walt Whitman* (1819 –1892) found inspiration in nature.

However, most of the American romantics could not cope with the English masters such as *Coleridge* (1772 – 1834) and *Wordsworth* (1770 –1850) who called for simplicity of language, the supremacy of emotion over reason, the depiction of the innocent, the infant and the poor, the interaction between fancy and imagination, individualism, unity between man and Mother Nature, and revolt against authority. Romanticism as a reaction against '*the age of reason*', as was the case after the Victorian Age in England, took a new form in America when its major advocate *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1803 –1882) produced their major essays: "*Nature*," "*Self-Reliance*" and "*The Poet*." Since he was the most influential writer of the 'Romantic era' in America, his essays may reflect some light on the general trend. In "*The Poet*" he asserts:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only himself, the other half is his expression. The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness, a primary method. If according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of 'self' – which suggested selfishness to earlier generations – was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance." (An Outline of American Literature: 26)

Obviously, Emerson and his associates, to name the most prominent ones such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, were all engaged in celebrating a concept beyond "*Romanticism*" known in our modern age as "*Transcendentalism*". This term according to Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, is defined as "*an idealist philosophical tendency among writers in and around Boston in the mid-19th century*". Growing out of Christian Unitarianism in the 1830s under the influence of German and British Romanticism, Transcendentalism affirmed Kant's principle of intuitive knowledge not derived from the senses, while rejecting organized religion for an extremely individualistic celebration of the divinity in each human being. The leading Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson issued what was virtually the

movement's manifesto in his essay "Nature" (1836), which presents natural phenomena as symbols of higher spiritual truths. The nonconformist individualism of the Transcendentalists is expressed in Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance' (1841) and in Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden' (1854)—a kind of autobiographical sermon against modern materialism." (P, 262)

In fact, these literary figures were inspired by the Romantic Movement to shape a new optimistic affirmation and outlook to life in New England where their expression found a fertile soil that was ready for more dynamic approaches and outlooks in literary expression. Kate Chopin as a writer is in the same line as those who gave a new vision to "Romanticism." She can be considered as an extension to those who celebrated the holiness of every single soul that can be achieved through freedom, individuality, self-assertion and equality. She is not far away from Whitman's claim to immortality in "Song of Myself." Here is only part of this poem:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.*

(An Outline of American Literature: 31)

The speaker in the above lines is quite contented and self-satisfied to the extent of celebration. For this specific speaker, the 'self' is holy and that "I" and "You" are equals since the same word 'assume' is used for both to indicate a single weight. In the third and fourth lines, the speaker assures that all individuals are the same since the 'self' is made from the same 'atom.' Naturally, regardless of gender, race, social status or religion, Kate and Whitman believe that "self" holiness whatever it is. Who else could express such a warm and honest feeling in which all people are 'one' and the 'one' signifies all human race except a romantic poet that believes firmly in the holiness of every individual spirit. It is a poem that only befits a poet like Whitman who criticized America in his long essay "Democratic Vistas" (1871) by describing that period as the 'Gilded Age' with its "mighty many-threaded wealth and industry that mask an underlying 'dry and flat Sahara' of soul."

Evidently, those leading figures of the American romantics did not seek an escape from city life by dwelling in the countryside as their British contemporaries and counterparts did. Instead, they created their own form of expression that befits the newly-made republic and Kate Chopin could be counted in the same streak. She admired Maupassant but she did not try to copy him except in the evident fact that she handled subjects that no other American writer of the period, especially women writers, could dare to explore or even slightly touch. So her works such as the short story "The Storm" and her novel "The Awakening" were met with a wave of severe criticism due to their content in which "taboo subjects," by the standards of 19th century America, were presented.

Actually, Kate Chopin could have adopted a pseudonym to cover her real identity and to give reason to the public to accept her work under the mask of a man's name. This might have smoothed the wave of negative criticism but she did not. Obviously, even male writers did not dare to write on subjects concerning sex or marital relations. It is noteworthy that in England "the Brontes" could only publish their works under the guise of a pseudonym.

5. THE QUESTION OF 'RACE' IN KATE CHOPIN'S STORIES

“....that child is not white; it means that you are not white...” (Chopin’s The Father of Desiree’s pp 45-56)

Chopin has dived into a very controversial issue in 19th century America as well as the rest of the globe. That is the question of 'Race'; white versus black. In two stories, at least "*La Belle Zoraïde* (1890s)" and "*Desirée's Baby* (1893), Chopin has not only adopted realistic-feminism features, but also went beyond that to give a photographic representation of basic human values related to race and colour.

In the story "*La Belle Zoraïde*" she brought into light the lives that governed the interrelations between the White mistresses and their slaves which is much more relevant to the story’s meaning than the issue of feminism. However, the fact that the story is told from a black woman perspective might give a sense of believability to the representation of the way white women’s are depicted. Caught in such a race dilemma, the only mixed raced character lost her mind because of the cruel treatment she continuously received. The mistress of Zoraïde believes that she was behind the beauty of her slave. She told her:

"Remember, Zoraïde, when you are ready to marry, it must be in a way to do honor to your bringing up. It will be at the Cathedral. Your wedding gown, your corbeille, all will be of the best; I shall see to that myself. You know, M'sieur Ambroise is ready whenever you say the word; and his master is willing to do as much for him as I shall do for you. It is a union that will please me in every way." (Chopin *La Belle Zoraïde* pp 20-21)

If this quotation and other similar situations are examined carefully, one may conclude to the fact that the way characters were built shows Chopin’s concern with the ‘*Blackness*’ issues rather than womanism. The complexity of being black and a child of two white parents is the fundamental theme intended to be communicated.

In the story "*Desirée's Baby*" the main character’s (*Armand*’s) child began to develop Afro- American features which lead to the rejection of both the child and the mother. At the end of the story, the readers came to know that *Armand* himself had African blood. Chopin in this story depicted racism in a form of self-hatred as well as a cause of death. Through such Interconnections: racism – death – self-hatred, Chopin successfully handled racism and placed it as a universal issue that might lead to both self-hatred in the first place and then death.

Chopin's versatile diversity of subjects and modes of characterization is evidenced in her depiction of characters who come from different social and cultural backgrounds. This amazing diversity includes *Creoles*, the *Arcadians*, and slaves of various colours and shades. Using the elements of themes and characterization in her stories enables her to explore matters of racism and identity. Interestingly enough to mention a short story that she wrote in 1892, entitled "*Old Aunt Peggy*" about a hundred and twenty-five year old black female slave who refuses to be set free at such an old age and asks her former master to continue taking care of her until she dies. She says:

"Massa, I ain't never gwine to quit yer. I'm gittin' ole an' feeble, an' my days is few in dis heahlan' o' sorrow an' sin. All I axes is a li'l eco'nerwhar I kin set down an' wait peaceful fu de en." (Chopin: 193).

Consequently, as demonstrated in this story Chopin's depiction of racial issues and interest in the diversity of culture, critics' views and arguments differed on whether she is a 'racist' or 'anti-racist'. However, it is clear that she simply did not record such lives in her writings in order to satisfy her readers' intellectual interest. Instead, it would be much more accurate to say that Chopin was totally concerned with racism as a universal issue drawing attention to how it was treated and dealt with by the American society at that time.

These two stories shared basic similarities in the depiction of American reality in the 19th century. In addition to that, both stories revolve around the issue of blackness and womanhood. The combination of these two issues led to a

catastrophe of hatred and death. Hatred and death are a universal plague for both sexes. The baby which represents the future and hope turns to be a cause of sadness and hatred. All in all, Kate Chopin in *Désirée's Baby* and *La Belle Zoraide*, accentuated the issue of hatred, racial segregation and death as a global phenomenon.

6. KATE CHOPIN'S AS A PROLIFIC SHORT STORY WRITER

Kate O'Flaherty was born in 1850 in St. Louis, Louisiana, Missouri to a middle-class family a descendent of French and Irish origin parents in the slave-holding South and, in fact, one of five children who all died very young and she was the only one surviving at the age of twenty-five. Her father died in a tragic railroad accident after falling off a bridge and she lived with her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother in a house described as dominated by "women" and "gossip" as Per Seyersted, her biographer, called it. According to most critics, Chopin expresses her ideas about the emancipation of women in 19th century America in most of her stories. Yet, some of her short stories were written for children. Except for a few stories where the central character is male, the bulk of her canon is populated with a female protagonist testifying to a general trend of classifying her as a major literary feminist pioneer. The paper will question whether this is true, or at least applicable to *The Story of an Hour* (1898), or not.

Kate Chopin wrote more than one hundred short stories and two novels *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* 1899. A large number of her short stories is dominated by Creole characters from Louisiana where she lived and had her early experience of getting to know people of mixed races. In the American south, mixed groups of French and Spanish backgrounds lived as well as other minorities such as the enslaved blacks. Due to Chopin's recurrent portrayal of central characters who inhabit a southern milieu, some critics identified her as a 'local colorist' a term referring to writers who were interested in showing the cultural background of the people who inhabited certain regions in America before shaping the spirit of the 'Republic' that melted this acceptable cultural yearning for the minorities to be recognized as indigenous ethnic groups. However, Chopin's works were far beyond this delimiting label as 'local colorist' as her works depict other characters with African origins such "*Desiree's Baby*". Generally speaking, she repeatedly wrote about Creole women in Louisiana and the South in particular. This is actually the reason for some critics to classify her as 'local colorist' according to the habit of that period.

In her short stories as well as fiction Chopin explored and portrayed her view of marriage, racism, and individual rights as human phenomena. In A Critical Biography Per Seyerstad pointed out that, "In short, Mrs. Chopin appears to have achieved that thing – comparatively rare even today: to become a woman author who could write on the two sexes with a large degree of detachment and objectivity" (p. 169). In fact, in her stories, she went beyond that to design a human message throughout her writings.

The following list, without any significant order, states some of her short stories. The purpose of including them here is to show that Chopin's most stories revolve around women. All these stories without a single exception, depict a woman as a central figure testing her personality through different situations that certainly encompasses humanitarian issues with universal themes at heart; by definition larger than feminism or the delimiting cliché of a 'colorist.' The rest of her stories are placed at the appendix of this study.

- A No-Account Creole: (written in 1888, and then rewritten 1891, published in 1894) about a woman who is engaged, however, another man tried to marry her.
- The Storm : (written in 1898) bout a married woman who has an affair with her lover during a storm)

- A Pair of Silk Stockings: (written in 1897) about a married woman fallen on hard times and how she spends money
- Desiree's Baby: (written in 1893) about a baby and racial crisis between a husband and a wife
- A Respectable Woman: (written in 1894) about a married woman evolving response to a visit from her husband's friend.
- The Kiss: (written in 1894) about a woman scheming to marry a rich man
- The Locket: (written in 1897) about two young lovers during the American civil war
- Ma'amePelagie: (written in 1893) about an unmarried woman's life; at the age of 50
- Athenaise: (written in 1895) about a willful young woman who runs away from her husband's Louisiana Plantation and lives secretly in New Orleans
- Bayou Folk: (written in 1894) Creole short stories
- A Point at Issue: (written in 1889) about a young couple who test their marriage commitment by living independently for two years.
- A Vocation and A Voice (written 1896) about an adolescent torn between his commitment to religion and his attraction to a young woman.
- At the Cadian Ball: (written in 1892) this story is a prequel to "The Storm". The same characters with variations in theme and addition of other characters.
- Charlie: (written in 1900) about the devotion between a tomboy and her widowed father
- Fedora: (written in 1895) about a thirty-year-old woman in love with a younger man
- Her Letters: (written in 1894) About the husband of a woman who dies before she can destroy letters written to her by her lover.
- Lilacs: (written in 1894) about a Parisian performer who seeks respite from her city life by retreating each spring to the convent where she lived as a girl.
- Madame Celestin's Divorce: (written in 1893) About a woman who consults her lawyer about divorcing her husband.
- Ozeme's Holiday (written in 1894) about a man who spends his vacation helping a poor woman and her son gather the cotton harvest.
- Regret: (written in 1897), About an unmarried who becomes responsible for her neighbor's four children.
- Ripe Figs: (written in 1897) about a young girl seeking permission to visit her cousins.
- NegCreol: (written in 1896) About Chico or Neg, a fishmonger who suffers due to the color of his skin and his social status. One of Chopin stories that handles the question of race in America generally and the southern states mainly.
- Per Seyerstad, Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969)

7. EPISODE AND THEME OF THE STORY OF AN HOUR

The Story of An Hour was first published in 1894. The central figure of this short story is *Louise Mallard*, a young lady, whose husband is reported as one of the victims of a railroad accident without her prior knowledge. It is expected that *Mrs. Mallard* who has heart trouble could suffer if this sudden death news is delivered to her straight away. Appropriate preparation is badly needed to make death notification less stressful and above all to avoid a negative impact on her weak heart. So her sister *Josephine (her sister)*, along with *Richards* who was one of the late deceased friends, come to her rescue so as to transfer to her this piece of sad news in a smooth way that would not affect or worsen her weak heart. The condition of this 'heart' is communicated ate the opening sentence of this story, "*Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.*" (Chopin, 2007:4)

Richards saw *Brently Mallard's* name on the list of those who are identified as "killed" and went to the newspaper's office early in the morning so as to assure himself about the reliability of this tragic accident. *Louise* sobs at the moment of realization but very soon she shows us a totally different face. Making her way upstairs, she refused her sister's offer of giving her a hand or comforting her. She locked up herself in her room.

In her room facing an open window, she could see grey clouds in the sky and the tops of trees dancing. She could hear a peddler calling for his wares, listen to a distant song and so many sparrows singing. She could smell the sweet breath of rain in a moment of true reflection as she realizes that her immediate shock and grief will soon pass away and be replaced by a life without restraints or oppression. She would live '*for herself*' she thought, declaring that she would be "*free body and soul*".

"When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under the breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body". (Chopin, 2007:4)

Not only were her senses operating in a normal way, but also her body was full of life and energy at that moment. Her sister who was unaware of this new state of mind and body implored her to stop torturing herself and come down so as to join her. *Josephine* came downstairs to the lobby feeling as if she were "*goddess of victory*" in order to make her sister see that "*all is well*". At this very moment, someone was trying to open the front door. It was her husband *Brently Mallard* who was far away from the scene of the accident and didn't know even '*there was one*'. Both *Josephine* and *Richards* tried to shield this unexpected comer's view. Unfortunately, their movements and attempts to avoid this sudden shock were too late. According to doctors' diagnosis, the reason for death is "*heart-attack – out of joy that kills*".

"Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife .When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of the joy that kills". (Chopin, 2007:6)

Successfully Chopin not only shows that *Mrs. Mallard* is emotionally and physically drained but also she tries to portray her in a way that stresses her awakening experience. She did not depict her as a submissive wife who is not sad about her husband's death, but as a wife who sees death as a great opportunity to have a better life and independence. The

most obvious theme of *The Story of an Hour* is the conflict between freedom and imprisonment. In this regard, the story's final message is similar to the writer's masterpiece and controversial novel *The Awakening* which ends with the suicidal act of the central character *Mrs. Pontellier*.

It is important to note that the most crucial part of this story is the realization experience that comes after *Mrs. Mallard* faces 'the window of life' which paints a new independent lady.

8. DISCUSSION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

The artistic quality of Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* can be investigated using semiotics 'semiology': the study of meaning-making, sign process and meaningful communication, by highlighting signals, words and contexts used in the story. Semiotics as an approach reveals how meanings are made, concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. In *The Story of an Hour*, these words, phrases and symbols are so intricately interwoven in such a way to bring about the unity of effect desired by the author. For instance, if you take the physical description of *Mrs. Mallard* who is "young" and there are lines on her face that "bespeak of depression," you would notice that her physical appearance is not emphasized except when it comes to mean what she stands for. She is 'young' and "repressed". The word 'young' suggests activity and potentials whereas "repressed" suggests disconnection with feelings and emotions. This *young* woman has just given her *heart*, her identity as a human being, to the oppressive practices in the name of social codes and became disconnected with her emotions and feelings.

The following table highlights keywords and phrases that operate like 'codes' to signal meaning. They show how the central character moves on physically and emotionally in her experience and course of gaining freedom as if in three stages. These three stages are related to Mrs. Mallard's physical description, eyes description, feelings and emotions, and movement. All these phrases are extracted from the text without any modifications.

| Context | Stage One | Stage Two | Stage Three |
|---|--|--|---|
| Mrs. Mallard's description | She was <u>young</u> , with a <u>fair, calm face</u> | whose lines bespeak <u>repression</u> | and even a certain <u>strength</u> |
| Description of Mrs. Mallard's eyes and looks | now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. | The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. | There was a feverish triumph in her eyes. |
| Feelings at the moment of receiving the news of her husband's death | She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. | a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams. | she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window. |
| Her feelings towards her husband | she had loved him-- <u>sometimes</u> . | <u>Often</u> she had not. | What did it <u>matter</u> ! |
| Movement | .roomy armchair. Into this, she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion... | She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite <u>motionless</u> , | her bosom rose and fell tumultuously ...she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. |

Evidently, implement different strategies in this story to effectively reflect the global nature of these feelings and emotions. Mrs. Mallard's transformation into a new character as a result of her husband's death reveals a universal truth about how a person's life might emotionally and physically change as a result of freedom. Chopin wrote, "...breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long." (Chopin, 2007:5). The language here foreshadows the transformation of this young woman and takes the reader step by step to witness the price of freedom.

Arguably, these three stages of human existence known as facts of life (birth, life and death) seem to operate in this text semantically and structurally:

- The first one is when Mrs. Mallard hears the news of her husband's death. She weeps and she could not move; she was paralyzed.
- The second stage is when she decides to go up to her room alone. This stage represents thought followed by realization. Her body is empowered, her heart and senses start to work properly.
- The third stage is when she comes down carrying herself 'unwittingly like the goddess of victory'. This stage represents the celebration of victory with signs of love when she embraces her sister. However, the irony inherent in this stage is the sudden return of her husband, the symbol of repression. She dies at the very moment of celebration. These twists and turns make the ending ironic and the main character a person of all ages.

Some words and phrases in this story are chosen with precision and have more significance than their literal meanings. They are used in a symbolic sense to convey the overall message behind this story. These Significant words and phrases include:

- "**window**" which stands for freedom and life outdoors,
- "**room**" which has two levels of meaning signifying the dichotomy of both imprisonment and '**space**' or freedom.
- "**birds singing on trees**" metaphor for "*flying as free as a bird*".
- "**the peddler crying his wares**" refers to engagement in common people's life.
- the voicing of what is '**sold**' refers to the fact that she sells her marriage and **buys** 'freedom',
- "**patches of clouds in the sky**" indicate spirituality and holiness of soul as well as the prospect of rain as alluded to in the phrase '**sweet breath of rain**'.
- Even Mrs. Mallard's first name 'Louise' can be considered as a distorted form of Louisiana (where the writer lived) to give the story a symbolic significance that can be extended to stand for '*America as a free or independent country*' bearing in mind that the story when first published in Vogue 1894 has the title of *The Dream of an Hour*.

Could it be the '*The American Dream*'? In fact, the whole story seems like an extended metaphor on the physical and the materialistic aspect of life in opposition to the spiritual developed through the yearning of the soul and the depth of feelings at moments of intellectual engagement rather than just casual thought. In the meantime, it is important to emphasize that *Mrs. Mallard* is not a representation of women since she doesn't cry like "*like women do*" in this situation. Also, she becomes like '*the goddess of victory*' and this gives her a universal value. This situation is ironic because '*death*' was behind this transformation as she can now see years of happiness stretching into the future.

The research believes the story's document was shown so early when the narrator told us "*There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.*" (Chopin, 2007:5)

This reference in the story to imposing one's will upon another in the name of love or whatsoever and the message

is clear that enslaving a fellow creature is inexcusable. Besides, no feminist qualities or domestic obligations are mentioned in this story to make it a feminist manifesto to women's lack of freedom or self-assertion. It is also clear that Mrs. Mallard in this story is not depicted as an American. The setting of the story does not state anything about the locale or time of the action. This story concerns 'a woman as a human being' more than an American wife, and it could be argued that a reverse of roles might happen after her husband's arrival. He could go up alone and experience the same feelings and utter the exact words of 'freedom'.

9. CONCLUSIONS

essence of life and dies at the altar of the American Dream of freedom and equality, it would be unfair for this artistic literary work to be acknowledged in terms of women emancipation. Evidently enough, the story inspects the question of freedom in its universal magnitude that incorporates every living soul in this far and wide universe regardless of their color, sex, religion or social status. This is definitely the most important theme of this short story. The misjudgment of Chopin's works might be justified by the strong movement of feminism in the 19th century in the United States that got a lot of attention and support.

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